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SOME CURIOUS COLONIAL REMEDIES¹

THE weapon-ointment derived from the Rosicrucians was compounded of many absurdities; there was pulverized blood-stone, a cure by likes, and there was also moss taken from the skull of a dead man unburied, and other ghastly ingredients.² This precious unguent was applied not to the wound but to the weapon or implement which had produced it. The weapon was then carefully bandaged to protect it from the air. It was the wound, however, which was healed; the cures are well attested, as impossible cures usually are. Experiment proved that "a more homely and familiar ointment" would serve the turn just as well, and, moreover, in that day of emblemism the ointment proved quite as efficacious when applied to an image of the offending weapon. To the Rosicrucians was attributed also a similar cure which came into great notoriety in England in the middle of the seventeenth century.³ This was the widely famous sympathetic powder, made of vitriol with much ceremonial precision. The powder stopped hemorrhages either from disease or wounds. It was applied to the blood after it

¹ From the unpublished volume entitled *Transit of Civilization*.

² It must have been unfortunate to have a prescription of such value in controversy, but the authorities were not agreed as to its ingredients. Moss from the skull of a dead man, *æri derelicta*, was however a permanent element. Bacon gives some account of one prescription in his *Natural History*, section 998. But John Baptist Porta has the prescription given by Paracelsus to the Emperor Maximilian and received through a courtier by Porta. I give it in English: Two ounces of skull moss as above; of human flesh, the same; of mummy (a liquor reported to be distilled from dead bodies) and of human blood, each half an ounce; of linseed oil, turpentine and Armenian bole, each one ounce; pound all together in a mortar. Porta's *Magia Naturalis*, liber VIII, caput xii. According to Porta the weapon was left lying in the ointment. In the text I have followed a different account in Bacon's *Natural History*. In the selection of ingredients for this preparation the mystical doctrine of curing by similitude is manifest.

³ Sprengel, *Geschichte der Arzneikunde*, IV. 343.

had issued from the wound or to the blood-stained garment. Winthrop of Connecticut, a fellow of the Royal Society and the great medical authority of New England, imported the latest books¹ on the subject of this powder, which may well have come into use in a country where surgical cases were not infrequent. Before Winthrop's time and after, learned German writers on physic had attempted to give a scientific basis to the weapon-ointment and powder of sympathy by attributing their operation to magnetism,^{2, 3} a term that has covered more ignorance than any other ever invented. The philosopher Kenelm Digby, a contemporary of Winthrop, made himself the protagonist of the powder in a treatise on the subject. Lord Bacon was in some doubt about the weapon-ointment, but he rather inclined to believe in its cures because a distinguished lady had similarly relieved him of warts by rubbing them with a rind of pork which was then hung up, fat side to the sun, to waste vicariously away, carrying his warts into non-existence with it. Roberti, the Jesuit, believed that such cures took place but ascribed them to the devil. All these cures that were wrought without "contaction," including the home-made sorcery of curing warts, Bishop Hall accounted damnable witchcraft.⁴ Of such necromancy the bacon-rind cure has alone survived to modern times. The rag-bag of folk-medicine is filled with the cast-off clothes of science.

The seventeenth century lay in the penumbra of the Middle Ages and the long-sought potable gold of the alchemists was yet in request;⁵ it even enjoyed a revival.⁶ Almost everything precious and

¹ E. g., *De Pulvere Sympathetica*, 1650.

² Sprengel as above, IV. 345, 346.

³ "The operation of this ointment," says the author of a famous pharmacopoeia in 1641, "is by the identity or sameness of the Balsamick spirit which is the same in a Man and in his blood; for there is no difference but this, in a man the spirit actually lives, but in the blood it is coagulated." Schröder quoted by Salmon, *English Physician*, VII. 65. See also Sir Kenelm Digby's *Sympathetic Powder*, generally, and a theory of the action of this powder or "zaphyrian salt" in Howell's *Familiar Letters*, Jacob's edition, 645. An account of the cure of Howell by this remedy is in Supplement II., 674, 674. The sympathetic powder was used for all hemorrhages and even for other diseases, according to Sprengel. Compare Sir K. Digby on the cure of swelled feet in oxen, *Discourse on Sympathetic Powder*, 129-132. In the time of their greatest vogue these cures were probably never sanctioned by the strict Galenists. The subject was discussed before the Royal Society in its infancy in a paper entitled "Relations of Sympathetic Cures and Trials." Sprat, 199.

⁴ Hall's *Cases of Conscience*, 232.

⁵ An English manuscript in my possession in the hand-writing of the seventeenth century gives many directions for alchemical processes to attain the "quintessence" so much sought. Some of these had to be conducted in the earth. Under the title, "The Essence whereby to dissolve Gold," this occurs: "To the Essence of wine twice circulated (as is elsewhere taught) add Gold and sett it in digestion in Sand with a Lamp For 3 months and yu shall find the Gold dissolved but not irreducibly, never the lesse a quarter of a Spoonfull given at a time to a dying man, tho he be insensible it will restore him half an hour to perfect sence, as ever he was in his life."

⁶ Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Sec. 1, 3.

rare was accounted of medical virtue,¹ and it was inferred that gold as the most precious metal would be the most valuable remedy,² if it could be taken in liquid form. The known usefulness of mercurial remedies was attributed to the fact that mercury was the densest of liquids. Gold was the densest metal then known, and it was easily concluded by the process of using fancy to give fluidity to logic, that if it could be reduced to drinkable consistency it would be the most valuable of medicaments. There was a yet more convincing way of proving its medical value by the process of presumption, so much used by hermetic philosophers. The sun and gold were related in the mystical thought of the time;³ the sun as chief luminary was the "lord in the property" of gold. "There is not found among things above or things beneath," says Glauber, "a greater harmony and friendship than that between the Sun, Gold, Man and Wine."⁴ The easy logic of the time found in this transcendental fancy a therefore potent enough to make gold a universal

¹ Queen Elizabeth's ambassador to the French court in 1596 was attended in his illness by Lorrayne, a physician of the famous faculty of Montpellier, and another. "They gave him *confectio Alcarmas* composed of musk, amber, gold, pearl and unicorn's horn," ingredients whose virtues seem to have been deduced from their rarity and costliness. The *confectio alkerms*, an Arabic remedy, varied in its ingredients. The amber was ambergrease. See formula in the Amsterdam *Pharmacopoea* of 1636, page 61, and that in the London *Dispensatory*, as quoted and discussed in Culpepper's *Physician's Library*, 1675. The Arabic form of the confection appears to have been less complicated. In the pharmaceutical work of Mesue the younger—"John, the son of Mesue, the son of Mech, the son of Hely, son of Abdella, king of Damascus"—the ingredients in this *confectione alkerms* are fewer and there are no pearls or ambergrease. The costly elements are "good gold," "good musk" and lapis lazuli. My copy of this work is called *Mesue Vulgare*, perhaps because it is in Italian. It bears date Venice, 1493, and must have been one of the earliest printed medical works. See K. Sprengel, II. 361-364, on "Mesue der jüngere."

² On the tendency to expensive remedies compare Howell's *Familiar Letters*, 45. "More operativ then Bezar, of more virtue then Potable Gold, or the Elixir of Amber." In Molière's *Médecin Malgré Lui*, Act. III., Scene 2, Sganarelle speaks of a medical preparation: "Oui, c'est un fromage préparé, où il entre de l'or, du corail, et des perles, et quantité des autres choses précieuses." An English confection described by Bassompierre may have been the *confectio alkerms* spoken of above: "A pie magisterial of ambergrease, pearl, musk." Bassompierre's *Embassy*, 3. The Bezoardic powder magisterial of the London *Dispensatory* contained sapphire, ruby, jacinth, emerald, pearls, unicorn's horn, Oriental and American bezoar, musk, ambergrease, bone of stag's heart, kermes and sixteen other ingredients. "I am afraid to look upon it," says Culpepper. "'Tis a great cordial to revive the Body, but it will bring the purse into a consumption."

³ Gold is said by the alchemist to have its origin in the sun; it is called "the under sun" and the "earthly sun endowed by God with an incredible potency. For in it are included all vegetable, animal and mineral virtues." Potable Gold is the "tincture of the sun," and the enthusiastic Glauber talks of "partaking of the fruit of the Sun-tree." Compare Phaedro and Glauber *passim*. A large volume would not be sufficient to recount all the virtues of the powerful remedy, in Glauber's opinion. Compare the account of it in Evelyn's *Diary*, I. 271

⁴ Glauber, *De Auro Potabili*, 3, and Georgius Phaedro, *Vom Stein der Weisen*, 1624, 394-397

remedy for human maladies where the recovery was not "contrary to the unfathomable counsel of God." Gold was even administered in its solid state; Arabic doctors prescribed leaf gold and it held place in several compounds. Fragments and leaves of gold were seethed with meats and the broth used to cheer the heart and raise the strength and vital spirits of invalids beyond all conception.¹ But the hermetic writers thought the use of leaf gold a coarse application of a metal which they were fond of styling "the lower sun." Preparations professing to be potable gold and tincture of gold were in much request and frequently administered in the seventeenth century.² On the other hand, their efficacy was warmly debated. The alchemists held that three drops, at the highest, taken in wine or beer would cure the most serious illness.³ Of its nature it is more than enough for us to know that it was triplex, being vegetable, animal and mineral; it was one thing chosen out of all others, of a livid color, metallic, limpid and fluid, hot and

¹ Lemnius, *De Miraculis Occult. Nat.*, 1604, pp. 309, 310.

² The curious and scientific reader may follow if he can the process for making potable gold, the "True tincture of the Sun," in the various works of Glauber or in *De Via Universalis*: he may learn to get both the potable gold and the philosopher's stone by "the dry process" or by the "wet process." He may get directions for making the tincture in Glauber's *De Auri Tinctura sive Auro Potabili*, a German work with the usual Latin title, dated 1652. Or he may read the *Panaceae Hermeticae Universalis* of Johann Gerhard, 1640, and he will find the "most secret mode of compounding the Universal Medicine" in the *Arcanum Lullianum*. Then there is a rare tractate, *Vom Stein der Weisen*, written in the middle of the sixteenth century, by Phaedro von Rhodach. These and others are before me, but after some wearying of the mind with esoteric phrases, in a compound of old German and Latin I prefer to leave the question of the actual constitution of the most potent universal remedy to special investigators. Foussagrives in the *Dictionnaire Encyclopédique des Sciences Médicales*, under the word *Or*, says that a preparation of mercury and chloride of gold constituted the so-called potable gold of the seventeenth century; I do not know on what authority. I am in some doubt whether, after all the complicated huggemugger, the alchemists got any gold in their final decoctions. According to Phaedro it was not so much gold they sought as the subtle spirit of gold that freed men and metals from impurities. Glauber, in his *De Auri Tinctura*, 1652, p. 24, took pains to explain how the true should be known from the false and sophisticated potable gold, some of which was nothing but colored water. Angelus Sala, though of the Paracelsian school, ridiculed the notion of drinkable gold and declared that fulminating gold (*Knallgold*) was the only preparation of that metal that had ever been made. Sprengel, *Geschichte der Arzneikunde*, IV. 357. It has been conjectured that some of the so-called potable gold offered for sale was merely a preparation of mercury. The two metals are allied in the fancy of the time. In *Ehralter Ritterkrieg*, Gold calls Mercury "Mein Bruder Mercurio" and yet says that mercury was the female and gold the male. Salmon's *English Physician*, p. 10, has two recipes for making tincture of gold, the one with, the other without mercury. More than one writer intimates that there is as much gold left after the essence is drawn off. "Aurum decoctione non alteritur," says Lemnius. But the mere looking at gold coins or at rings, especially if adorned with "stones and lovely gems," recreated the eyes and heart, and a man might be brought to himself when in a collapse by applying gold saffron to the region of the heart with the third finger of the left hand. Lemnius, *De Miraculis Occultis Naturae*, 309, 390.

³ Phaedro von Rhodach, 443.

moist, watery and swarthy, a living oil and a living tincture, a universal stone and a water of life of wonderful efficacy.¹ So spoke the admiring alchemist.

John Winthrop the younger, of whom we have spoken, was a man of an eager and curious mind, fond of peering into the occult. He dabbled in alchemy as well as astrology and on his shelves were many of the latest works on potable gold. A poet of his time says of him :

“Were there a Balsam, which all wounds could cure,
'Twas in this Asculapian hand be sure.”

He left a son Wait who inherited his father's fondness for prescribing, and who like his father was adept in panaceas and was believed to have golden secrets and secrets more precious than gold “unknown to Hippocrates and Helmont.”² Doubtless many New Englanders were dosed by the revered Winthrops³ with the true tincture of the sun, potable gold, made by marrying in some fashion the “masculine gold” to the “feminine mercury,” and possessing all virtues, vegetable, animal and mineral, “destroying the Root and Seminaries of all malignant and poisonous diseases.”

Weapon-ointment, sympathetic powder, potable gold were much thought of, but the authorized pharmacopoeias ignored these Gothic medicines and traced their origin to alchemists and Rosicrucians. Yet the notion of a universal antidote was in regular medicine as well. Primitive science, having no reins on the imagination, longs for perfection, seeks the universal and dreams of great discoveries. Back through a long line of medical writers we may trace the belief in the virtues of theriac and mithradate to Galen and into the cen-

¹ Geber, quoted in *De Via Universali*.

² Green's *Medicine in Massachusetts*, quoting Cotton Mather.

³ The library of Winthrop the younger consisted of more than a thousand volumes. The fraction of it now in the Society Library of New York is less than half. Among these is *Hercules Chymicus sive Aurum Potabile*, 1641, and *Traité de la Vraye, Unique, Grand et Universelle Médecine des Anciens, dite des Recens, Or Potabile*, 1633. There was also Glauber's Latin treatise of 1658 on potable gold. These were new books. The revival of interest in potable gold in the seventeenth century awakened opposition. Burton in his *Anatomy of Melancholy* says: “Some take it upon them to cure all maladies by one medicine severally applied, as that panacea, Aurum potabile, so much controverted in these days.” In 1403 an English statute had been passed making it a felony to “use any craft of multiplication” to increase the quantity of gold and silver; *Statutes at Large*, II. 403. Robert Boyle in the seventeenth century, in spite of his having written the *Sceptical Chemist*, thought he had discovered the forgotten secret of the fifteenth century, but he did not print his discovery. Sir Isaac Newton wrote to the Royal Society in praise of Boyle's reticence, fearing that the full disclosure of what the hermetics knew was “not to be communicated without immense damage to the world.” In 1689, however, Boyle secured the repeal of the statute forbidding the making of gold. Thus did the dark shadow of medieval credulity fall still upon the most enlightened minds. Compare Chalmers's *Dictionary of Biography*, VI. 348, 349.

turies before Galen. The accepted story of its origin is that Mithradates, king of Pontus, by a series of experiments on criminals, had found out or thought he had found out what medicaments would neutralize various poisons. These he put together for a universal antidote.¹ Andromachus, physician to Nero, changed the constitution of the remedy somewhat by adding the flesh of the viper, probably on the principle of curing like by like. The remedy of Andromachus was the famous theriac which was so much lauded by Galen and which imposed itself even on modern times.² It was expelled from the British *Pharmacopœia* only in the middle of the eighteenth century by a bare majority of one vote in the college. It contained more than sixty ingredients and was commonly known in England as Venice treacle.³ Not only all poisons but many diseases were supposed to be conquerable by this universal remedy. Numerous other preparations of viper's flesh were in use. Things poisonous were thought to contain much virtue. What theriac was used in the colonies was no doubt made abroad. In less complicated preparations the American rattlesnake was made to take the place held for thousands of years by its rival in virulence, the European viper.⁴ The flesh of the rattlesnake was fed to the infirm, perhaps in broths, as the viper's was given for ages, and as the Scotch used the adder; his gall mixed with chalk was made into "snake balls" and given internally, his heart was dried and powdered and drunk in wine or beer to cure the venom of the snake on the ancient principle of curing by likes.⁵ In Virginia the oil of a snake was given for gout, while in frosty New England the fat was, if we may believe Josselyn, "very sovraigne for frozen limbs . . . and sprains." The American backwoodsman of to-day perhaps unconsciously uses a substitute for the viper wine or theriacal wine of other times when he soaks the flesh of a rattlesnake in spirits to make "bitters" against rheumatism.

There was yet another universal antidote recognized in the regular medicine of the time. The bezoar or bezar stone was a concretion taken from the intestines of wild goats and other animals. That brought from the Orient was accounted most valuable. It

¹ Galen, *De Theriaca ad Pisonem*, and *De Antidotis Epitome*, Adams's *Paulus Ægineta*, III. 528, Maranta *De Theriaca et Mithridatio*, 1576.

² The multitudinousness of ancient compounds was perhaps a trait derived from primitive medicine. The Iroquois had a sort of theriac, a cure for all bodily injuries, made from the dry and pulverized skin of every known bird, beast and fish. Erminnie A. Smith in Powell's *Second Report of the Bureau of Ethnology*, 73.

³ Comp. Adams on P. Ægineta, III. 121, Judd's *Hadley*, 361, Josselyn's *Two Voyages*, 114.

⁴ Byrd's *Westover Papers*, 66.

⁵ Joannes Juvenis, *De Medicamentis*, 240, and Salmon's *English Physician*, 763.

was used first in the East as an amulet ; there were other remedies of olden times that served their purpose just as well when worn about the person as when taken medicinally. A "stone" found in so unusual a place excited wonder, and there grew up a mythical notion of its origin. This particular wild goat, in the opinion of the sixteenth century, indulged itself on occasion in a diet of poisonous snakes. To cool the burning produced in its stomach by this debauch the creature plunged into the water. On coming out he sought and ate of health-giving herbs, and as a result the bezoar was concreted in his vitals.¹ The cost of the bezoar, the "queen of poisons," was great ;² "if you take too much your purse will soon complain," says a medical writer in 1661. The concretions of the "mountain goat" were the original bezoar, but any intestinal formation of the kind came to be considered bezoar. In Java the viscera of the porcupine were eagerly searched for such deposits and one of these worthless things, called a *pedro porco*, was sold for the price of pearls.³ There were ruminants in Chili and Peru that yielded bezoars, which ranked second to those of the East ; Mexico contributed a lower grade still.⁴ Finding these stones valuable the shrewd Indians learned to counterfeit them, and as they were of all

¹ Monardes, Eng. ed., p. 3, and Acosta, Lib. IV., chap. xiii.

² Tanner's *Art of Physic*, 515.

³ "In that country (Java) but very seldome there grows a Stone in the Stomach of a Porkapine, called Pedro Porco : of whose virtue there are large descriptions : and the Hollanders are now so fond, that I have seen 400 dollars of $\frac{3}{4}$ given for one no bigger than a Pidgeon's Egg : There is sophistication as well in that as in the Bezoar, Musk, &c. and every day new falsehood." Sir P. Vernatti in Spratt's *Royal Society*, 171. There was exhibited in the University of Leyden "the horne of a goate in whosse ventrikle the besar stone is found," Marmaduke Rawdon, Camden Society, p. 105. Compare the accounts of Monardes and Acosta and the discussion in Castrillo's *Magia Natural*, last chapter. Castrillo calls the bezoar "Regna de los Venenos," and says that it cured pestiferous fevers and other diseases caused by melancholy humors. Joannes Juvenis in his essay *De Medicamentis Bezoardicis*, published in Antwerp in the latter part of the sixteenth century, treats the bezoar very mystically. A disease of an occult and divine origin—*divinus et Secretus Morbus*—like the plague, exacts a medicine of a heavenly and concealed faculty, or, as he said, with a blind and hidden potency. The plague, he says, is a mysterious disease of the heart caught by inhalation from poison dispersed in the air by a malign conjunction of the planets. It requires a bezoardic remedy. Under this head he includes alexipharmical mixtures and remedies, whose supposed virtues have no rational basis, as well as amulets. He describes an amulet of gold, silver and arsenic made into the shape of a heart and worn next to that organ by Pope Adrian, and he recommends the wearing of six precious stones and some brilliant pearls in finger rings or about the neck. They are to be frequently looked on, for in them resides "the hidden bezoar" against all poisons and the plague. There is here the sense of alexipharmical in the word bezoar. Compare the citations of Adams in *Paulus Aegineta*, III. 274. Bequin's *Éléments de Chymie*, edited by Lucas de Roy, 1632, describes seven kinds of "bezoart," to wit, mineral, solar, lunar, martial, jovial, metallic and solar of Harthmannus. None of these have anything to do with the bezoar stone. The word bezoar in the sense of antidote appears to antedate the application of it to the stone.

⁴ Castrillo, Chap. XXVI.

sizes, colors and forms, and there was no test of fineness, there were others than natives who knew how to sophisticate, so that the famous powder magisterial of bezoar often probably contained nothing of the kind. The remedy was known in the colonies : Clayton, the parson, who was in Virginia before 1690, tells of a skillful woman physician there who gave pulverized "oriental bezoar stone," in the case of a man bitten by a rattlesnake, and followed it with a decoction of dittany, the same, at least in name, as that ancient remedy which Venus applied to the wound of her son, Æneas,¹ and to which the wild goats, in those knowing times, resorted when the winged arrows of the hunters pierced their sides. We get a notion of the persistence of medical tradition when we find administered in Virginia an antidote² brought into Europe from the East in the Middle Ages³ and an orthodox simple derived from the remotest Greek antiquity ; and both of them probably without merit.

EDWARD EGGLESTON.

¹ *Æneid*, XII. 412.

² As the eighteenth century advanced, bezoar seems to have lost ground gradually in England. Sir Conrad Sprengell (an English writer not to be confounded with the more famous German of a later generation, Kurt Sprengel), in his comment on Celsus in 1733 says : "As some have prescribed Bezoar Stone, Lapis de Goa, Pulv. Gasc. &c. when Crab's eyes or oister shells would have done as well or better."

³ Cf. *Calendar of Hatfield House MSS.*, V. 3.